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Proof: A True Crime Podcast
Season 2: Murder at the Warehouse
Episode 2: The Boyfriend, Obviously
Monday, January 22, 2024

Donna Ramos:

The detective came and knocked on the door. And he just gave me that solemn look.

Susan Simpson [00:10]: Just two days earlier, on Saturday, June 3rd 2000, Donna Ramos had reported her 18-year-old daughter Renee missing. Now, on Monday morning, a detective was on her doorstep with the worst possible news.

At a construction site on the edge of town where a Home Depot was being built, workers had discovered the body of a young woman.

Donna:

And I asked him, point blank. I said, "Is it Renee?"

And he just said, "Well, I'm pretty sure it is. But we still have to wait for dental records."

Officially, the body had not been identified. But unofficially, there were no doubts that it was Renee. The missing person case was now a murder investigation.

Donna:

He said, "Who do you think could have done this?"

And I said, "Well, it was probably Jake."

In my head already, I thought it was Jake.

Susan: Did you tell him why you thought that?

Donna:

Because of the relationship they had. She had a black eye about two weeks before her murder, and I remember her in the bedroom just putting makeup on her face.

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When Donna had seen the black eye, she asked Renee if her boyfriend, Jake Silva, had hit her. Renee denied it, but Donna didn't believe her.

Donna Ramos [01:25]:

I just told her, "You've just got to break up with Jake. You've got to break up with this kid."

I said, "If you don't break up with him, a black eye's gonna lead to something much worse. What's gonna happen next?"

She just blew me off. "Ok, Mom. It's ok, Mom."

Everything was ok.

Susan Simpson: That was one of the last times that Donna ever spoke to her daughter. Less than three weeks later, Donna would be describing that conversation to the lead detective in her daughter's murder investigation.

Susan: I'm Susan Simpson.

Jacinda Davis: And I'm Jacinda Davis.

Susan: I'm an attorney and investigator.

Jacinda: And I'm a true crime TV producer.

Susan: And this is Proof Season 2: Murder at the Warehouse. Proof is a Red Marble Media production in association with Glassbox Media.

For the past year, we've been re-investigating what happened after 18-year-old Renee Ramos went missing in the spring of 2000, and we discovered that in this case not everything is what it seems. This podcast tells the story of what our investigation uncovered.

Jacinda: New episodes are released on Mondays. And on Thursdays, you can catch our Sidebar episodes – where we talk about the case, talk to guests, and tell you more about what's going on behind the scenes.

You can find additional materials about this case, including pictures, exhibits, and videos of people we spoke to on our website, at proofcrimepod.com.

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Susan: You're listening to Episode 2: The Boyfriend, Obviously.

Jacinda Davis: If you've ever been inside a Home Depot, you know the buildings are not complex structures. For the most part it's just one big room.

So, if you imagine what a Home Depot would like without any aisles or shelves or checkout lanes, then you've got a pretty good idea of what the Home Depot in Manteca looked like on June 5th, 2000. There was no orange paint yet, just a cavernous concrete shell, with a few holes in the walls where doors would eventually be installed. And all of it was surrounded by acres of cleared dirt.

That morning, the site had been bustling with construction activity. By 9am, there were 50 or 60 workers there.

But all construction came to a grinding halt when one of those workers – 22-year-old Richard Bowling – made a horrifying discovery.

We weren't able to talk to him for the podcast. But one of Renee's friends that we interviewed had also been friends with Richard Bowling, and he remembers Bowling telling him about it

Male Speaker 1: Rick Bowling. You know that name?

Jacinda: Yeah, the guy who found the body.

Male Speaker 1:

I've known Rick since we were little kids. When he told me he found her, because he was working for like, Labor Ready or something, I was just like, "Oh my God."

Male Speaker 1:

He told me he had went into picking up the garbage and said he found Renee under a pile of trash.

Crime scene photos show that the concrete floor was coated in a layer of thick gray dust that was crisscrossed with tire tracks from construction equipment, but otherwise everything was pretty tidy.

The exception to this was a pile of yellow insulation that had been dropped in a heap at the back of the building, not too far from where, eventually, walls would be put up to block off the building's bathrooms.

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The construction workers we spoke to who'd been there when Renee was found all agreed that the pile had been there for some time.

Male Speaker 2:

Well, I remember seeing that insulation pile there when we were there a week before.

Male Speaker 3:

That big pile of insulation was always there, it had been building up. It was a trash pile.

Male Speaker 2:

We were walking back and forth by that insulation for two days prior before she was found. And then the day she was found, I had thrown stuff on the pile of insulation that she was under, but when I went to go get more screws, there was a laborer up there, and he goes, "Hey, I think I found a dead body."

I said, "What?" I said, "No," you know, "there's, there's no way."

He goes, "Yeah, come here."

And so he got a piece of a two-by-four stud, he lifted it up, grabbed the insulation with it and pulled it back, and I walked right up to her body. I looked at her and I looked at him, and I said, "Oh, it's just a mannequin."

And I took maybe five steps and then I stopped dead in my tracks, and it hit me. I said, "Hold on a minute. Mannequins don't have nipples. Mannequins don't have veins on their breasts."

And I turned around and I said, "Pull back that insulation."

And he pulled it back again, and I said, "That's a dead body. That's a girl."

When the labor kid pulled it back... the insulation... Does that make sense?

Susan: You say, "that labor kid..."

Male Speaker 3:

Yeah, the ki- whoever, whoever was working for, yeah, he was working for Labor Ready, I think. And um, I told the kid, I said, "Hey, you need to go get ahold of your boss and you need to call 9-1-1."

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Jacinda Davis [07:04]: The kid he's talking about— Richard Bowling — did as he was told and brought his boss over. By then, a few other nearby workers had heard the commotion, and started to gather around the pile of insulation.

Male Speaker 3:

So then the supervisor came over and pulled the insulation off of her, and there she was.

There was only one piece over the top of her. It was like exactly the length of her. It was just laid right on top of her. She wasn't even like really... she was on the edge of the pile.

Susan Simpson: Oh, so she wasn't even really buried.

Male Speaker 3: Yeah, yup.

Male Speaker 2:

I mean, when I knelt down I was like face-to-face with her and I can tell you what she was wearing. I can tell you what she looked like to this day.

She was wearing jeans that were pulled down a little bit past her waist so you could see her black panties. She had, I think her top was like a maroon color, but it was pulled up so you could see her breasts.

Jacinda Davis [07:51]: Renee's jeans were the 90's style that had a lace up in the front, rather than a zipper. But her jeans had been untied and pulled halfway down her thighs.

From the point of view of the Home Depot workers, it had seemed like her black underwear was still in place. But the back side of the underwear had been rolled down, partially exposing her.

Her dark red t-shirt had the logo from Limp Bizkit's 1999 album "Significant Other" emblazoned on the front, and had been pushed up around her neck, exposing her entire torso. And although her right arm was still in place through the shirt sleeve, her left arm had been pulled out of the shirt entirely.

Her bra was also pushed up around her neck and unhooked, in the back, but the straps were still around her shoulders, and according to the crime scene report, there was no indication of forced removal.

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The workers who found her had known immediately that she was dead. But the ones we spoke to were all under the impression that she had not been there under the pile of insulation for more than a handful of days.

Susan:

You said earlier, “We were walking by her for two days.”

How do you-

Male Speaker 2:

Yeah, so... they had told us that she got killed on the Thursday, sometime Thursday night. We worked there Friday, and we worked there Monday. I was told it was on the Thursday evening that she was killed there.

Susan Simpson: That’s interesting.

Male Speaker 2: Yeah, is that accurate? Or is that not?

Susan: Well, that’s part of why I’m looking into the case.

Male Speaker 2: Oh, ok.

Jacinda Davis [09:29]: Before Jake Silva and Ray Goans were arrested for Renee’s murder, they both told police that the last time they saw her alive was at the Labor Ready on Monday, Memorial Day, a full 7 days before her body was found.

Investigators believe Jake and Ray are lying about this, and that Renee was not killed until several days after the trip to Labor Ready. In fact, at least initially, investigators believed that Renee had still been alive for most of the following week.

But that would still mean Renee’s body had been at the construction site – or somewhere else – during a hot Californian spring, for several days before she was found.

Male Speaker 2:

This is what I was told, but they were saying because she was under all that insulation, that it kept everything like, it kept the smell in? From kind of like, you know, like from escaping or something.

But like I said, I knelt down. I mean, I was face-to-face with her. I mean, I was within inches of her. It didn’t smell to me. It didn’t- there was no smell.

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Susan: Crime scene specialists from the California Department of Justice were called in to help the Manteca Police department process the crime scene.

There was some trace evidence collected – hairs found on and around Renee’s body, and swabs from blood stains or possible blood stains that were seen nearby. But, other than that, little in the way of physical evidence was found, and nothing that was determined to have any relevance to Renee’s murder.

In fact, it’s what wasn’t found at the crime scene that seemed to hold more significance.

Renee was known to carry her belongings with her wherever she went. But not all of her belongings were found with her when her body was located.

Renee’s mother Donna recalls that in the day’s after her daughter’s body had been found, she’d asked around about the items to see if anyone had seen them.

Donna Ramos:

The only time I went to Jake's house I think it was on June sixth and he was there, and we were both crying.

I said, “Does Renee have any clothes or anything here you want me to pick up?”

Jacinda Davis: Oh, so you saw him, like, the day after you found out.

Donna:

I went over there, and I remember going in the house. And I remember hugging him, you know. But I was just so, like, emotionally upset, that I was just like, oh my gosh. You know? Jake. You know.

Susan: Was he crying?

Donna:

Yeah. And I said, “Is there anything here I can take home?”

I mean we never found the backpack, to this day. Never the back- the backpack has been missing forever. They never found it anywhere.

Susan: And her shoes, too.

Donna:

And her shoes. And I just can't understand what happened to that backpack.

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Susan: And the shoes... like, why didn't she have shoes on?

Donna:

And the shoes were no- nowhere in the, at the construction site. They never found them. I don't know what happened.

Susan [12:27]: Renee's murder was the first homicide in Manteca in nearly three years. Media attention was intense, and in the days that followed, local newspapers reported on the case in detail.

Here's our co-host, Kevin Fitzpatrick, reading excerpts from some of those articles.

Kevin Fitzpatrick:

"A woman found dead Monday in the new Home Depot building [] has been identified as high school junior Renee Ramos."

"There were no obvious signs she was sexually assaulted," [a police spokesperson said,] "but she was partially clothed when she was found." "[H]er bra was unsnapped."

"Police say [she] was probably dumped at the construction site over the weekend." "The coroner determined the body had been [there] for up to three days."

"[Detectives] have collected videotapes from [all the stores around town with] surveillance cameras in hopes of collecting more clues about the identity of the killer."

"So far, police have no suspects in Renee's murder."

Susan Simpson [13:21]: That last line - about police having no suspects in the case - was not exactly true. Because as soon as Renee was identified, the police had a suspect. They went back to the Home Depot to show photos of him to the workers there.

Male Speaker 2:

The police came around with pictures of guys with mohawks, asked if we'd seen them around there. But, yeah, we never saw anybody around there.

The guy with the Mohawk was Jake Silva. And after Lead investigator Detective Joe Morgan spoke to Renee's friends and family, Jake became the focus of the investigation. For good reason.

Jacinda Davis:

Ok, so we just finished having a meeting with Joe Morgan. Retired Detective Joe Morgan, who was the lead detective for this case.

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Shortly before our first trip to Manteca, we had reached out to Detective Morgan and asked if he'd be willing to meet with us and talk about the investigation. He agreed and we met at the hotel lobby where we were staying.

Jacinda:

He... willing to talk to us. Did not want to be recorded, but willing to share his thoughts.

Susan:

I'm not sure I would say he was a willing interviewee, but he felt that, as a public servant, he had an obligation to...

Jacinda: It actually felt more like we were being interviewed.

Susan Simpson: It did, actually.

Jacinda Davis: I think we were in the hot seat.

Susan: Pretty sure that that's actually what just happened, but-

Jacinda:

Yeah, we just got interrogated. But I'm holding out hope that he'll, he'll continue to talk to us and eventually agree to be recorded.

Susan [14:52]: Spoiler: He never did agree to be recorded for the show. Which is too bad because as Jacinda and I couldn't help but joke after our first meeting with him, he kind of seemed like the gruff, no-nonsense detective that you'd expect to encounter in a true crime show.

Jacinda: He also should be hosting an ID show.

Susan: He would be great.

Jacinda: He'd be like the perfect detective to host a show. Watch out Joe Kenda.

Here's another spoiler: no other investigator who worked on this case agreed to talk to us about it. We tried to speak to the other detectives involved but Detective Morgan was the only one we heard back from.

And Morgan told us he gets why that is. He gets why other investigators would not want to speak to investigative reporters. "Because," he told us, "you usually get screwed over when you do that."

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But Detective Morgan's personal belief was that, as someone who'd been a public employee at the time, he had an obligation – a moral one, if not a legal one – to be accountable to the public. So, if we had reasonable questions about the case that he was reasonably able to answer, then yes, he would tell us what he knew.

The impression I got from him was that equal parts annoyed and curious about what we were doing. I think he found it somewhat obnoxious that we were there in Manteca, skulking around, questioning his old department's work on the case. But at the same time – he wasn't that surprised that someone was there to talk to him about it, even all these years later.

He basically told us as much, when he explained why he'd held on to a copy of his investigative report for 23 years. "I always anticipated that someone would be asking me about this case someday," he said.

Susan Simpson:

It was very enlightening. Not in the ways I'd hoped. Because there was a lot of questions we have about this case, and it turns out he does not have the answers.

Jacinda Davis [16:39]: One of the things Detective Morgan was able to tell us about is what happened in the immediate aftermath of Renee's body being found.

Susan:

The whole department was working on this thing for weeks. They had everyone, all hands-on deck. He was the lead.

According to news reports, 14 police officers were assigned to work full time on the case. But Manteca was not a place where a lot of murders happened. Most of them had never worked on something like this before.

Susan:

And the only other real senior investigator in the department was Tony Souza who was, I think Morgan said, the only other person in the department that was capable of leading this kind of investigation.

Jacinda: Yeah, he said he was a really good investigator.

By chance, it had been Detective Morgan on duty when the call from the Home Depot came in. So, it was Morgan, and not Souza, who was assigned as lead detective.

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But Souza was involved in the investigation from the beginning. And one of the first things he and Morgan did was talk to Renee's friends and family about her relationship with her boyfriend.

Amber: In the beginning I didn't have any reservations or anything about Jake.

That's Amber. Earlier this year, Amber and Lori, another one of Renee's close friends, sat down with us to tell us about Renee, and her relationship with Jake.

Amber:

I know in the beginning it was different. But I just remember him always being very quiet.

Lori: He was uncomfortable.

Amber: And Renee's personality, she was very, um...

Lori: Bubbly.

Amber:

...bubbly, and she was very, you know, kind of energetic, a little bit hyper. And just, he was just kind of like...

Lori: ...there.

Amber: ...there.

Lori:

When they started dating, I remember thinking to myself, like, he's a little strange.

Jacinda Davis [18:50]: Renee's friends couldn't understand why Renee thought Jake was such a catch. But they could tell she'd fallen hard for him. And, for a time, Renee and Jake seemed happy together.

Susan Simpson: Were they lovey-dovey in public?

Lori: I feel like, yeah.

Amber: They and hugged and, you know -

Lori: Yeah.

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Amber: Holding each other all the time.

Lori: Yeah, constantly next to each other, yeah.

Susan:

My sense of things from the files from reading reports, it seems like things were going fine-ish, or like n-, no one had real concerns for the first like six months they were dating.

Until he went away to Oregon for a bit, and it seems like it's when he came back that things started to spiral out.

Lori: Yeah, that seems to be true.

Amber: That sounds right.

In December of 1999, after Jake and Renee had been dating for about six months, Jake ended up moving to Oregon to live with his mother, while he worked on getting his GED. He and Renee stayed together, but their relationship was strained by distance.

Amber:

I do remember him being gone. And I think that was when I was trying to get her to move on and find someone else. And I know that she probably did like, venture and try different things.

And I know that she did cheat on him with you know, a couple of times, but you know, they're young and it was...

Jacinda Davis: Right.

Jacinda [20:18]: In early spring of 2000, Jake moved back to Manteca. Right away though, he noticed something was off between him and Renee.

Jake asked her what was wrong, and that's when she told him: she'd slept with someone else.

That's when the arguments between them began. And soon, the arguments were turning physical. Renee's mom remembers suspecting something was wrong but didn't know for sure what was going on.

Donna Ramos:

She never told me that he was actually abusing her because I think they would hit each other.

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Susan Simpson: Why do you think that?

Donna:

Well, because it was in the police records, too, that they would hit e-, that they, that she hit him, he hit her, and she hit him back.

Renee's friends and family never saw the fighting themselves. But several witnesses told investigators they'd seen arguments between them escalate into physical fights, with Jake and Renee shoving and slapping one another, screaming at each other, with Jake pushing Renee, and Renee kicking at Jake's shins.

Lori:

Yeah, she had a feisty side to her. So, I can imagine that when her and Jake got into it, like it was probably bad, like on both sides like.

Amber: Right, yeah. She would definitely stick up for herself.

Lori: Yeah, if she was mad, she was not quiet about it.

The people who saw these fights did not necessarily interpret it as domestic violence. And in reports, it was sometimes framed as something Jake and Renee were mutually doing.

But that framing ignores a stark difference between the two of them. Jake was 6 foot one.

Susan Simpson [22:05]: How tall was she?

Donna Ramos: She was five-one.

Susan: So she was real little.

Jacinda Davis: Oh, she was tiny.

Jacinda: Even if she didn't tell her friends and family about everything that was going on, it seems like the frequent arguments were taking a toll on Renee. At one point, she confided in Amber that she was thinking of breaking up with Jake.

Amber:

She said, "I want to leave him. But every time I look into his eyes, I just can't."

I do believe the reason she couldn't leave him is because there was that abusive aspect to it, where he's kind of like, broke her down a little bit. And now she feels like...

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Lori: She needs him or something.

Amber: ...that's what she wants.

Jake and Renee didn't break up. And the arguments didn't stop. Then, in April, Renee realized she'd missed her period.

Lori:

I remember going to Planned Parenthood with her to find out. She came out and we sat on a curb, and she had said that it was positive that she was pregnant. And it was like, no emotion from her.

Then I was like, "Well, what do you want to do?"

I don't remember exactly what she said, but I know that it wasn't like, she wanted to keep it. So. And we just sat there for a while like quietly.

Susan:

On the forms at Planned Parenthood, she checked that like, she wanted to keep it.

Lori: Oh, really?

Susan Simpson: Yeah. And that her partner wanted to keep it, too.

Lori: Oh.

Jacinda Davis [23:37]: We don't know why Renee checked the forms the way she did or why she told Lori she didn't want to keep the baby but whatever the case, Renee's pregnancy – and Jake's reaction to it – would later become a pivotal piece of the prosecution's case at trial.

But Jake says that even though the pregnancy had been a surprise, once they got over the shock of it, they were both actually kind of excited.

Jake Silva:

When she was pregnant, yeah, it was scary, and it was awkward, but we were gonna do what we had to do for the baby.

Susan Simpson: Renee's mother was not as excited about the situation. Donna did not think Renee and Jake were in any position to have a child.

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On April 14th – three days before Renee’s 18th birthday – she took Renee to the clinic to have the pregnancy terminated. And according to Jake, that was one of the reasons for a growing rift between Renee and her mother.

Jake:

I know she was tired of her mom trying to run her life and trying to like, dictate her life.

But she was also right because we weren't in the best position. We didn't have money. We were fucking living on the streets. We were fucking idiot kids. You know? It was just the wrong time.

Susan:

And seriously, what would y'all have done? Like, y'all have a kid, what would you have done?

Jake: I didn't think we knew.

It was around that time that Renee left home, and she and Jake began living out of her station wagon. The arguments between them didn’t stop, though. And Jake says one of the things they argued about often was how Renee had cheated on him while he was in Oregon.

Jake:

I think she missed me because I was at my mom's house, and I don’t know. It killed me. I know that.

Susan Simpson: Did you try and ask her why she did it?

Jake Silva:

Yeah, shit, I don't think she knew. It just happened. That's what we were arguing about when I broke the windshield.

Susan Simpson [35:35]: When Jake and Renee first moved out into the streets, they’d been sleeping in Renee’s station wagon. The Spaceship, they’d called it. But as you might remember from last episode, its windshield had been broken, and the two of them had been forced to start couch surfing and sleeping in bushes to get by.

But the windshield had not been busted out in some kind of accident. Jake had broken it. On purpose.

Jake: I remember punching it, I think. Or did I hit it with something?

Susan: I think you punched it. But that was your home.

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Jake:

You took the words out of my mouth. Like a fucking moron. Because that was our everything. And all I did was fucking ruin it.

After that, Jake and Renee had slept wherever they could. Jake's friend Robbie Mendoza had a car that he kept parked outside of his house, and on nights when Jake and Renee didn't have anywhere else to go, Robbie would let them stay in the car overnight.

Jake says that's where they were when they got into their worst argument they'd had yet.

Jake:

We got into a bad argument, and I made a stupid mistake and I slapped her. I remember it. We were in the car. She was in the driver's seat, and I was in the passenger seat.

Susan: What were you arguing about?

Jake: Her cheating on me.

Susan: Did you just want an answer?

Jake Silva:

Just why. Like, what the fuck? How could it even be possible that she would do some shit like that, you know, as strong as, as it was for both of us, you know?

Eventually I would have got over it and it would have been fine. I just, at that time, it was just really bad.

Susan Simpson [27:14]: The next morning, when Jake and Renee woke up, they saw that Renee had a black eye.

Susan:

You know people are going to judge you, right? People are going to hear that you hit her and they're going to hate you.

Jake:

Of course. They're judging me now. They've been judging me damn near my whole life.

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Lori:

I didn't think that she was being abused by him until I think towards the end when - the black eye. The black eye was the- she's getting abused. But before that, no.

Amber:

She told me that, before she had told me that it was an accident. That he rolled over and elbowed her, and she got a black eye. Um.

But then she'd come over, and she was staying the night at my house, and we were just laying there on my bed, and she's like, "Actually he hit me."

And I was like, "Oh, hell no."

Lori: She probably didn't want to tell me.

Amber: No, she probably thought that I wouldn't do anything.

But Amber did do something. Something that would ensure that just about everyone would hear what Jake had done.

Amber:

I was very upset. Actually, I had gone to a friend's house and I go, "Hey, I really want to kick this guy's ass."

I go, "What's the best way to punch someone?" And he, he gave me some advice, and he told me that um, I should use a fist pack. So like you put something in the palm of your hand, and I guess your punch is a little bit stronger.

Susan Simpson [28:48]: One afternoon, as school was letting out, Amber heard that Jake was across the street, hanging out at the Taco Bell with some other teenagers.

She decided that was her chance.

Amber:

And I had this little Bic lighter. And I put it in my hand as I was walking up to him. And Renee was always saying that she couldn't leave him if she looked him in the eye, so the first thing I did was I socked him right in his eye.

And um, he fell back into the bushes. And then when he sat back, I swung again. And then I threw another swing.

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Amber told us she'd never hit anyone else, before or since. But that day, she punched Jake with everything she had.

Amber:

I was definitely in the heat of the moment there, but it was definitely something I had planned on doing because he had just- he'd done something to my friend that I felt like he needed to be punished.

Jacinda Davis: How did he react?

Amber:

He stayed there and let me keep hitting him. I don't know if he felt like he deserved it. He didn't really even try to defend himself actually. So.

Lori: He was just there.

Amber: He was just there.

I asked Jake what he remembered about what had happened at the Taco Bell.

Susan:

Well Amber told the police there was a time she like attacked you, like she physically started hitting you.

Jake Silva: Yeah, she did... because Renee had the black eye.

Susan: What did you do -- how'd you react?

Jake Silva:

It made me cry. I didn't know how to act, I didn't know what to think, I was just freaked out – I sure as heck not gonna hit her back. I'm not gonna put my hands on her, you know?

I didn't know what to do. I, I just felt so stupid, and felt so embarrassed.

Susan Simpson: Why were you embarrassed?

Jake: Because it was my fault. It was all my fault.

Susan Simpson [30:36]: Amber felt at fault too. Punching Jake had seemed justified at the time, but then, after Renee's death, she was left to wonder.

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Jacinda Davis: You said you felt guilty later.

Amber:

I did. I had a lot of guilt. I felt like what I did spurred what happened to her, you know, being humiliated in front of people and called out.

I really felt like I may have stirred up something that y-, you know, eventually led to her death.

Susan: Because it was pretty soon after that she disappeared.

Lori: Yeah.

Amber: Yeah. So yeah, I definitely, I suffered.

Lori: Yeah.

Amber: Big time. Because I felt like it was because of what I had done.

Jacinda: That afternoon in the Taco Bell parking lot was the last time Amber ever saw her best friend. Five days later, on May 29th, Renee went missing.

And exactly one week after that, rumors started flying around Manteca that a body had been found.

Jake:

I remember hearing that for the first time. They found somebody's body at Home Depot. They didn't even say who or what or anything. Just that they found a body.

Susan: Did you think it was Renee when you heard that?

Jake Silva: I didn't know.

Susan Simpson: But you thought it might be?

Jake:

I was worried that it might be. I didn't know where the hell she was. I didn't know what the hell was going on.

Jacinda Davis [32:14]: Less than hour after Jake first heard rumors of a body being found, Detectives Joe Morgan and Tony Souza showed up at his father's front doorstep.

Proof.

They asked Jake to come down to the station to talk to them, and he agreed. They put him in the interrogation room, and the video recorder started rolling.

In this tape you can hear Detective Morgan begin the interview.

Detective Morgan:

The girl that we found out there that you mentioned, that is Renee. She's dead.

Okay. So, that's kind of where we're at right now with this whole thing. We're trying to find out what happened to her.

Do you know anything about this incident? I know I kind of asked you that before. You have any ideas on who might be responsible for this?

Jake Silva: *[Crying.]*

In the interrogation video, you can see Jake's head jerk up when he hears Detective Morgan say the body they found was Renee.

But he doesn't initially respond to any of the questions. It takes Detective Morgan a moment to get Jake talking again.

Detective Morgan:

Okay, we talked before, when I first saw you today, a few minutes ago, you said that you dropped her off at Labor Ready?

Jake Silva: *[Nods head, yes.]*

Detective Morgan:

Okay, can you tell me a little bit about that and what was going on?

Jake Silva: *It was on Monday. Last Monday.*

Detective Morgan: *So we're talking like, eight days or so. Seven, eight days.*

Jake Silva: *Eight days.*

Jacinda Davis [33:46]: Jake has always said that the last time he ever saw Renee was at Labor Ready. He's never wavered on this point. In fact, this was what he was saying even before Renee's body was found.

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Jake Silva:

I got worried and one night at KFC, I went, I went up to the police and I said, you know, "She's missing and I'm worried..." and, you know?

Detective Morgan:

And was that the night that she first didn't show up or was that the next day?

Jake Silva: *That was, like, maybe two days, three days later.*

Detective Morgan: *Okay. And what'd you tell him?*

Jake Silva:

I just said that, you know, I dropped her off at Labor Ready and I haven't seen her since and she's been missing.

The police officer Jake spoke to had already reported all of this to Detective Morgan. So, Morgan knew Jake was telling the truth here. On Thursday, June 1st – three days after that morning at Labor Ready – Jake had been at the KFC when a patrol officer came in. Jake had approached him and tried to file a missing person report. But, since he wasn't a relative, he hadn't been able to.

Detective Morgan then asks Jake what Renee was wearing when he last saw her.

Detective Morgan:

Do you remember what she was wearing when you dropped her off at Labor Ready?

Jake Silva:

Yeah, it was a shirt that I bought her, it was a Limp Bizkit shirt. Bright red.

Detective Morgan:

Okay, what else was she wearing? What kind of pants was she wearing?

Jake Silva: *Light blue jeans.*

Detective Morgan: *Button, zipper?*

Jake Silva: *They're kind of weird. They're, like, tie-ups.*

Jacinda Davis [35:18]: The detectives don't say anything to Jake about it, but they would have immediately recognized the outfit he describes as the one Renee was wearing when she was found.

Proof.

It had been her red Limp Bizkit shirt that was pushed up around her neck. And she had been wearing lace-up blue jeans, but they had been unlaced, and pulled down almost to her knees.

Detective Morgan: *Does she wear jewelry?*

Jake Silva:

Yeah, she has necklaces on that I gave her. I bought her a hemp necklace, like, kind of like this one, but it had a butterfly in the middle.

And then she had on another one like this, but it had silver balls all the way up and around. And then another one had about six of them in the middle.

Renee had three hemp necklaces that she almost always wore. She was wearing them when she was killed. And those necklaces are also, apparently, what was used to kill her.

The medical examiner who performed the autopsy, Dr. John Cooper, concluded that Renee's cause of death was ligature strangulation. From three separate ligature marks around her neck.

Susan Simpson [36:29]: It doesn't take long, though, before the interrogation takes a turn. The detectives stop asking Jake factual questions about what happened to Renee and move to the portion of the interview where they try to convince him to confess.

It's an interrogation method called the Reid Technique. Basically, it's when investigators tell you over and over again that they already know you're guilty, and that they already have the evidence to prove you did it and all they need you to do is to explain why you did it.

In murder cases, the question usually goes something like this: Are you an evil mastermind who plotted to commit this foul crime? Or, are you a good person who never meant for this to happen, and things just got out of hand?

Detective Souza:

Good people do things that sometimes hurt others. Those are mistakes, but everybody makes mistakes. You understand, Jacob?

Jake Silva: *Do you honestly, do you think it's me?*

Detective Morgan: *Yeah. I think there's a pretty good chance it's you.*

Jake Silva: *Why? Why would I kill my own girlfriend?*

Susan Simpson [37:30]: Detective Morgan's partner for this interview was detective Tony Souza, and Souza explains to Jake they have very good reason to believe that he killed Renee.

Proof.

Jake Silva: *Why is it all on me?*

Detective Souza:

Well, things happen for a reason. And people who love others kill others.

Jake Silva: *That don't mean I'm going to, or I did.*

Detective Souza:

Well, have you noticed when the woman dies, who ends up being in trouble for it? Have you ever noticed that?

Jake Silva: *I think the biggest suspect would be the boyfriend.*

Detective Souza: *Why is that, if he loves her so much, why is that?*

Jake Silva: *I don't know. That don't mean I did it. You know?*

As Detective Morgan points out, though, it's not just that Jake was Renee's boyfriend that makes him a suspect. The detectives have only just begun to investigate, and already they've heard from several people about how volatile his relationship with Renee had been.

Detective Morgan:

You know, looking at it from my point of view, I've heard a lot of people talk about your temper, the fact that you guys were fighting back and forth, and the fact that she's even hit you.

And I know that good people can make mistakes when they're under pressure. Under bad circumstances people (unintelligible).

Jake Silva: *I would never kill nobody, I would never in my life kill anybody.*

Detective Souza:

Who, who in this world is capable of committing murder? Can a twelve-year-old person grab a gun and shoot somebody else?

Jake Silva: *Why? Was she shot?*

Detective Souza: *Can a twelve-year-old grab a gun and shoot somebody?*

Susan Simpson [38:57]: The point Detective Souza is trying to make here is that anyone can kill someone, if they're angry enough.

Proof.

“So,” Souza asks, “What made you so angry Jake? What made you kill Renee?”

Detective Souza:

We accept that as our job. We accept that people are going to be hurt and injured and murdered, murdered. We have to find out who and why it happened.

The evidence is gonna show that she was murdered. And the evidence is gonna show who murdered her.

The evidence isn't gonna show if it was an accident or if that person intentionally meant to kill her.

Souza was bluffing here about the state of the evidence. Samples have been sent off to the crime lab, but it will be many, many months before any results come back.

Right then, in this interview, what they need from Jake is a confession. Or, failing that, for Jake to say something that would prove he was lying to them.

Detective: *If we ask you to, would you be willing to take a polygraph?*

Jake Silva: *Oh yeah. Isn't that a lie detector test?*

Detective: *Yeah.*

Jake Silva: *Then yeah. Yep.*

Jacinda Davis [40:03]: That evening, Jake was given a polygraph examination.

He passed. No deception indicated. But Renee's mother told us that Jake passing didn't change her opinion of him.

Donna Ramos:

I just thought, well, a lot of people, a lot of killers pass the polygraph, so it didn't faze me.

They, did you see him in there going, “I didn't ki-,” he's doing this.

“I didn't kill her. I didn't. Did you kill Renee Ramos? No. Did you kill Renee Ramos? No.”

Jacinda Davis: What Donna is talking about here comes from a show called Real Interrogations, which aired an episode about Renee's case in 2008.

Proof.

As you might've guessed from the name, Real Interrogations used video footage of real police interrogations to tell the story of how criminal cases were solved.

And for that TV show, Detectives Morgan and Souza agreed to be interviewed and recorded.

Here's Detective Souza and then Detective Morgan explaining what happened during Jake's interrogation.

Detective Souza:

After asking him to take that polygraph we told him we needed to set some things up to do that and that we were going to leave the room and he started to do a few things in the room that kind of were out of the ordinary.

Jake Silva: *[Mumbling.]*

Detective Morgan:

We left the interview room for a short break, and we were watching Jake on the monitor...

Jake Silva: *Did you kill Renee Ramos? No.*

Detective Morgan:

It appeared that he was practicing a response to the question you know had he killed her?

Detective Souza:

And the intensity in him as he was saying it was was great. It was like he's convincing himself that he didn't do it.

The theory here is that when Jake later passed the polygraph, it was because he'd been able to rehearse his responses beforehand. And so, was able to fool the lie detector.

Donna Ramos thinks that's what happened as well.

Donna Ramos: I just- I've heard they... I don't know.

Susan Simpson: I think cops put more faith in them than is warranted.

Donna Ramos: I think he was practicing in there, though.

Proof.

Susan Simpson [42:14]: Late that evening, after hours of interrogation followed by a polygraph examination, Jake is released without arrest.

Detective Morgan told us that when Jake passed the polygraph that night, he'd felt like his guts were falling out.

Jacinda Davis:

He talked a couple times about it feeling like a punch when Jake passed the polygraph.

Like, I think he was convinced Jake wouldn't pass, and he did, and he said it felt like a punch.

Susan Simpson:

Because he was expecting a different result.

And I think he said later, he's like, you know, "I took a day to recuperate, got back at it, didn't let that get in the way."

Which you absolutely should not because polygraphs don't prove shit.

Detectives already have strong suspicions that Jake committed this crime – but suspicions were all they had. And you need more than that to make an arrest.

Susan:

He also, so, so, Detective Joe Morgan clearly thinks Ja-, Jake is guilty and thought from the start that he was guilty.

And like, to be fair, like the script writes itself. You have a dead eighteen-year-old girl. You find out her boyfriend had been abusive, you do the math.

Jacinda: Yeah.

Susan:

But, he also, it sounds like he was pretty sure that would be the answer and kept getting frustrated that he couldn't find the evidence of it.

Jacinda: He couldn't find evidence, s-, yeah.

One of the difficulties that investigators faced was simply how many unknowns there were in the investigation. In piecing together what had happened to Renee, Detective Morgan was basically starting from scratch.

Proof.

Jacinda Davis:

Well, he, he went back to like, what, how did he describe it? He had a word for the - absolutes, he only worked in absolutes.

Susan Simpson [44:08]: The absolutes in this case are few and far between. But, roughly speaking, here's what we know to be absolutely true.

On Memorial Day, Monday, May 29th, Jake, Renee and their friend Ray left Fuji's house to go to Labor Ready looking for work. But only Renee was actually able to sign-up so Jake and Ray left her there and went to sleep in a park while she waited to see if she'd be assigned to a job site.

Renee didn't get assigned anywhere though and three witnesses who were at Labor Ready that morning told police they saw Renee leave – alone, and on foot – around 10:00 am.

The next morning on Tuesday, May 30th, Jake returned to the labor ready and asked the woman who was working at the desk if Renee had come back in. The woman told him she hadn't.

Two days after that, on Thursday, June 1st, Jake was hanging out at the KFC when he saw a police officer. He approached him and tried to report Renee missing.

On Saturday, June 3rd, Renee's mom was finally able to file a missing person report, and Renee's friend Amber started posting missing person flyers around town.

On Monday, June 5th, at around 9:30 am, so pretty much exactly one week from when she was last seen at Labor ready, Renee's body was found under a pile of insulation at the Home Depot. She was wearing tie-up jeans and a red Limp Bizkit shirt. The same outfit Jake says she had on at Labor Ready, when he left her there, seven days earlier.

The next day an autopsy was performed, and the medical examiner concludes that Renee had been dead for approximately three days before she was found.

So, those are the absolutes that the police are working with, and all of this left them with questions they could not answer.

They believe that Jake had probably killed Renee but if he did then how and when did he actually transport her to the Home Depot?

This is why police became very keen on finding evidence that Jake and Renee had been together after Memorial Day. That would prove that Jake was lying about when he last saw Renee alive. And it would fit better with the timeline they were trying to piece together.

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Susan Simpson: And in fact, over a dozen witnesses did come forward and said that they had seen Renee after Memorial Day. Some of them said she'd been alone at the time. Some said they saw her with Jake and some of them described seeing Renee with men they couldn't identify but who were definitely not Jake.

And with that many witnesses all saying that they saw Renee after May 29th, that seems like proof she was still alive after that point, right?

Well, not so fast. Those witnesses and their stories were kind of all over the place, they contradicted themselves and each other. And it's obvious that not all of these sightings can be true. Some of them place Renee on the opposite sides of town at the exact same time.

So how do you figure out which of these sightings were real, and which were not? Which of these witnesses actually saw Renee after Labor Ready?

Jacinda Davis [47:06]:

Joe Morgan also said none of the people who um claimed to have seen her walking around, none of them were like ironclad witnesses, and he didn't put much weight into any of that.

Susan:

So, I was asking him why did they decide certain witnesses that said they'd saw her on certain days were the ironclad ones?

He's like, well they- none of them were.

Jacinda:

And he said it was being reported in the paper, on the news, the high school kids, the whole town is talking about it. Rumors are spreading everywhere.

Susan: Mmhmm.

Jacinda: And he was trying to deal in absolutes. And it wasn't going anywhere.

Those High School kids and their rumors were another complication in this case. Because most of the witnesses were teenagers. They were friends of Jake and Renee, who were both 18 years old.

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Susan:

One thing that was hard was that the people in this case were all juveniles or juvenile-adjacent. You have to be delicate with them because, he said, “They have very fragile statements.” They can't pressure them too much because the info you get is worthless.

Jacinda Davis [48:15]: Despite these complications, the investigation into Renee’s murder kept forging ahead. Investigators kept interrogating Jake Silva, kept interviewing his friends, and just generally kept the pressure up, hoping something or someone would crack.

After all, for obvious reasons, Jake was the lead suspect. He was Renee’s boyfriend. He had a temper. And he’d been violent with her.

Jake Silva:

That's why I was such an easy target because everybody was so mad at me for hitting Renee and being a bad boyfriend to her. I was a dumbass kid. I fucking hate it. It gives everyone tunnel vision. They’re so focused on me.

Jake’s complaint about investigators having tunnel vision isn’t unfounded.

There were hundreds of tips called into the Manteca Police Department, each of them assigned to one of a dozen or so officers for follow up. A number of those tips were about Jake – all of which the police followed up on promptly.

Susan Simpson: But there were a lot of tips called in too that were not about Jake. And a lot of those tips were never investigated at all.

Like when a woman called in to report that a man she knew – one of her husband’s friends – had been with Renee two days before she died. And that man was now acting super shady and seeming real nervous whenever Renee’s death was mentioned to him.

But the police never called her back.

Jacinda: Or, when two different people, on two different nights, from two different bars in Manteca, called in tips that a man who worked at the Indy’s car wash across from Home Depot – his name, they thought, was Quincy, though they weren’t sure – had been making statements about how he’d killed the girl, and how they were going to find his fingerprints and send him back to prison.

The detectives, though, didn't contact either of those tipsters to find out more.

Susan: Or when the security guard who worked at the hotel across the street from Home Depot called in to say he’d been working overnight on the Friday before Renee’s body was found. A

Proof.

little after midnight he'd heard screaming and loud noises from the direction of Home Depot. And then, not long after that, he saw a man sitting in a green Chevy Blazer parked on Yosemite Avenue, not far from the dirt road that led to the Home Depot.

But investigators never called the security guard back to find out more.

After all, Jake didn't have a license and didn't have access to a car so the security guard's tip couldn't have been about Jake. It must not have been important, then.

Jacinda Davis [50:55]: Investigators had been hoping to solve the case quickly. But then a month passed without any arrests. And then another month passed. And then another.

Three months on, the detectives had their suspect – Jake Silva – but they didn't have any evidence that they could make a case out of.

Detective Morgan told us, though, that he thinks it would only have been a matter of time before they got there. Everyone had been working so hard, and if he and his team had kept tracking down leads, kept talking to witnesses, they would have broken the case. Eventually.

But they never got the chance to do so.

Susan Simpson:

And then in like, early September, he was suddenly thrown off the case. So everything from that point forward - he has little insight into.

Jacinda: I wonder why they were getting pressure to solve it. Like, -

Susan: Because it's the biggest fucking murder this city's ever had.

Jacinda: Yeah, but, wouldn't... you want to be right?

Susan:

He told us, he was like, yeah, the bosses kept coming to me, like, have you solved it yet? Have you solved it yet? Have you solved it yet? And he's like, no, and that's not helping. Like, that's not actually advancing anything here. So, there was a lot of pressure. They thought he was going too slow. And, I can see why, when he was describing how he investigated cases, how a chief who was like, really eager to get this solved, might not want the methodical meticulous dude doing it.

Jacinda:

He said he went into the chief's office and said, "If you have a problem with me or, or if anyone has a problem with me just take me off of the case right now."

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Then he said, "You've never seen a, a man look so relieved in your life as the chief did."

And then, right then, he's like, "Okay, you're off. Souza's lead."

Jacinda Davis [52:33]: Detective Morgan told us when he went into his boss's office and said "Put Souza in charge if you think I'm not handling it right," he thought Souza would become the lead, and he'd still remain on the case under Souza.

That's not how it worked out though. Morgan was thrown off the case entirely. As was everyone else in the department, with the exception of one other officer -- named Kenny Wells.

Susan Simpson:

You went from a case where you had like sixteen people working on it to just two. It became an open, everyone-pitching-in kind of thing to, Souza and Wells have got this, and they're gonna run with it.

As Detective Morgan remembers it, it was the same day that he was kicked off the investigation that they received a phone call from a witness who said he had some important information to share.

"I want to talk," the witness told them over the phone. "I've got more to tell you."

Susan: And then Souza and Wells grabbed their recorder and ran off.

Jacinda:

Joe Morgan, he asked, "Do you want me to come along for help?"

And Souza said no. And Morgan said, "Oh, there goes the hot shots doing their case."

Since Detective Morgan was cut out of the case, he can't tell us what happened from that point forward. He didn't go with Souza and Wells to talk to the witness.

But in his interview for the episode of *Real Interrogations*, Detective Souza explained why that phone call had changed everything in the case.

Detective Souza:

We wanted a witness to come forward that could provide us with information that only someone who was there and someone who watched Renee get killed would know.

And we found that individual.

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Next week, on Proof.

Male Speaker 4:

I remember it being Memorial Day because that's why we were partying.

Detective: Because it was a holiday?

Male Speaker 4: Yeah. This is when we were at Home Depot.

Detective: What time did you get over there at Home Depot?

Male Speaker 4: Around, close to midnight.

Detective: What was going on over there?

Male Speaker 4: A bunch of fun actually. A bunch of kids having, just drinking.

Detective: Just drinking?

Male Speaker 4: There was a lot of people there.

Detective: It was a big party?

Male Speaker 4: Yeah.

Detective: Ok, now did something happen during the party?

Male Speaker 4:

Ty and Jake Silva strangled her with her own bra strap and then screwed her and then dumped her.

Detective: How do you know that?

Male Speaker 4: Because I saw him strangling her.

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That's all for this week... thanks so much for listening.

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